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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DISTRICTS HONORED FOR ACHIEVEMENT IMPROVEMENTS

(DES MOINES, IA) – November 15, 2006 – Seven school districts were honored by the State Board of Education today for improving gaps in student achievement.

Anamosa, Marshalltown, Norwalk, Sioux City, Wapello, Waukee, and Wayne community school districts each received a “Breaking Barriers to Learning and Teaching Award,” which were created by the State Board of Education to recognize successful efforts to eliminate achievement gaps by improving instruction, curriculum and programs, and professional development opportunities for school staff.

“Although Iowa’s overall achievement remains very strong, several persistent achievement gaps remain at all grade levels,” said State Board President Gene Vincent. “Removing those gaps is a Board priority, and we want to recognize districts that have dedicated the considerable resources needed to focus on helping struggling students. Their efforts to work as a team, use data to diagnose the gaps, and provide the right interventions is truly noteworthy.”

Districts earned the award if they made significant improvement among any subgroup of students in at least one grade level and subject, without allowing any other subgroup of students to decline significantly. Districts with a school on the federal school in need of assistance list were not eligible.

Highlights of the Breaking Barriers to Learning and Teaching Awards:

Anamosa improved reading achievement among low-income 8th graders. The district attributes its student progress to two main initiatives. One is a guided study program adapted from Richard DuFour’s book “Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don’t Learn”, which advocates a school wide system of intensive support for students who are disengaged from learning. The district also implemented reading initiatives across all content areas. It currently is in its second year of QAR (Question Answer Relationship), a reading comprehension strategy. The QAR strategy shows students that questions and answers have a variety of sources, and that learning about questions and their answers will help them, as readers, become better at understanding and answering questions. Teaching students about QAR gives them the language for talking about the strategies they use to answer questions. It also helps students to develop awareness of their own cognitive processes when answering questions. Contact Superintendent Dale Monroe, dmonroe@anamosa.k12.ia.us, 563/672-3221.

– More –

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Marshalltown improved both reading and math achievement among 11th grade English Language Learners. At the high school, students in the English Language Learning (ELL) program are offered three levels of instruction. Those with no English proficiency receive “sheltered” instruction. An ELL teacher instructs them in all core classes in their native language in a structured setting. They then move to a general education classroom where a native language specialist is available. In this classroom, instruction is in English and the specialist is there to clarify information if necessary. Finally, students progress to the traditional classroom with no language specialist. At this level, ELL teachers monitor students’ progress and grades. “This continuum really allows all teachers to interact with ELL students,” said Marshalltown High School Principal Bonnie Lowry. “It does make it a group effort in providing support for ELL students. The district invests time, energy, and funding for staff development. What is offered strategically pulls us together to reach common goals. Also, we have access to online media as well as physical resources, whether they are offered by Area Education Agency 267 or purchased by the MHS administration.” Contact High School Principal Bonnie Lowry, blowry@marshalltown.k12.ia.us, 641/754-1130.

Norwalk improved math achievement among 8th grade students in special education, who are attending a resource skill building class that offers smaller group sizes and intensive skill building for their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goal areas. For students with math goals, this includes practicing basic math facts, problem-solving skills, re-teaching of skills from the math class, and work completion. The district also offers other math classes for specific middle school special education students that are taught at the student’s instructional level. In these classes, students are expected to make corrections on assignment if they score below 70 percent, to gain mastery of skills. There is very limited use of calculators in these classes so students are better able to master the computation processes. Contact Superintendent Dennis Wulf, dwulf@norwalk.k12.ia.us, 515/981-0676.

Sioux City improved reading achievement among 11th grade low-income and English Language Learner students. The district developed Building Leadership Teams to focus on the use of research and data to drive instruction. Individual building staffs devote time to analyze summative data to increase achievement, while the district Student Achievement Committee supports more rigor, higher expectations, and enhanced graduation requirements. These expectations set the standard for closing the achievement gap. Increased professional development hours provided more time for teachers to collaborate and become more reflective. The district is continuing initiatives to raise achievement through elementary, middle, and high school literacy teams that will develop more rigorous curriculum that recognizes the need for adolescent literacy instruction. As a result, the district expects increased academic growth through research-based practices, data-driven decisions, measurement, and accountability. Contact Superintendent Larry Williams, willial@sioux-city.k12.ia.us, 712/279-6667.

Wapello improved math achievement among low-income 4th graders. The elementary school staff has been involved in Ruby Payne’s “A Framework for Understanding Poverty” training. Staff used achievement data to target the areas and students that needed support. Students were provided an after school math tutoring program, and all school staff volunteered to help so that students would receive small group instruction in math concepts and estimation. The 4th grade teachers used their individual career development plans to really focus on the needs of students. They formed a learning team using data, setting goals, sharing successful strategies and planning lessons. Daily reviews and mental math activities were implemented. Computer aided instruction was also used during the school day. Staff also continued its focus on reading instruction strategies, knowing that reading plays a huge part in standardized math tests. Contact Superintendent John Weidner, jweidner@wapello.k12.ia.us, 319/523-3641.

Waukee improved reading achievement among 4th graders in special education. The elementary special education teachers used a wide variety of tools and strategies to build the reading skills of students. Some youngsters are able to remain in their classrooms and access the reading program of their grade level with some support from their special education teacher. Other children qualified for one of the district’s direct instruction approaches such as Reading Mastery or Corrective Reading. As often as

scheduling would allow, staff made sure students who had pull-out reading instruction also had access to the rich reading instruction that occurs in the grade level classrooms. Central to all approaches was the practice of weekly progress monitoring and ongoing data analysis to guide instruction. Building leaders say they realize it is also critical to build caring relationships with students and their families, to set high goals for performance, and to help students make a connection between what they are learning and their lives. Contact Superintendent Dave Wilkerson, dwilkerson@waukee.k12.ia.us, 515/987-5161.

Wayne improved math achievement among long-income students in 11th grade. The district started a math club that also included a service component. Students assisted as tutors for other students for this service component. Some students also learned through computerized individual instruction. Placement in a newly developed Math Lab was based on scores on the ITED during the 2005-06 school year, which worked as an incentive for students to give their best effort. Staff also worked with AEA consultants to improve instruction and curriculum. Instructors implemented more problem solving and discussed methods to improve achievement. Teachers also learned methods of working with students and families through Capturing Kids' Hearts and Ruby Payne training that focused on teaching kids in poverty. Contact Superintendent Robert Busch, buschr@aea15.k12.ia.us, 641/872-1220.

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